



Reflections on Student Understanding of International Learning Experiences



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Educators generally agree that international learning experiences have positive impacts on students. Research has identified the range and variety of those effects, but little is known about the cognitive processes which precipitate those effects or about the configuration and durability of their impact (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

How Does Study Abroad Affect Students?

- Personal Development
- Career Focus
- Global Perspective
- Academic Commitment

After their study abroad experience students reported:

- Positive effects on self concept;
- New understanding of career possibilities;
- Approaching cultural difference more thoughtfully, looking at their own cultural background differently and feeling greater comfort in diverse settings.
- Wanting to learn and know more generally.

Method: A 1-credit hour experimental course (ANSC 199WH) was developed to explore the interface between study abroad, individual learning, and education as a communal activity.

Participants: 11 undergraduates who had studied abroad during the last year.

Procedures: During the semester students recalled, relived, and reinterpreted their international experiences through course activities, class discussion, and development of a teaching module about study abroad. Data consisted of student-generated journal entries on course activities.

- By confronting issues of identity and beliefs
- By recognizing the value, boundaries, and significance of their own knowledge
- By understanding the value and significance of shared knowledge
- By integrating the deeper meaning and personal significance of learning

How Do Students Think About Study Abroad Experiences?

At the beginning of the semester students were able to consider the details and events of their study abroad experience and were generally aware that they had changed but had difficulty identifying how they had changed or what that change meant. (1) Students reported that course activities resulted in thinking more deeply about their beliefs and experiences; (2) They began to recognize the value and limits of their new knowledge and define the significance of it which facilitated self confidence; (3) Students reported appreciating the opportunity to discuss their experiences and teach others about study abroad. Students believed that knowledge sharing helped them identify personal impacts and lasting value of their experiences; (4) Students began to redefine themselves in terms of their new knowledge and looked for ways to understand, organize, and integrate it into their self-concept.

Findings: Data confirmed earlier research indicating that learning abroad positively impacts students across a range of effects that can generally be categorized as personal development, career focus, global focus, and career focus (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Hadis, 2005).

Also identified were a series of cognitive processes through which students reported identifying new insights and understanding of the personal meaning and value of study abroad. The strongest evidence of patterns in cognitive processes occurred in the effects on academic commitment and personal development. Although data appeared to confirm the same processes in career focus and global commitment, processing was incomplete at the time the course ended.

References

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